



Peace & Plenty

A cruise up the Peace River reveals nature at its most plentiful

by Chelle Koster Walton

Travelers aboard the King Fisher Fleet's *Good Times Too* keep a sharp eye out for wildlife along the banks of the Peace River (above), such as lurking alligators (below).

Like a magic spell, the words “dolphin” and “alligator” made everyone, on cue, pop out of their PVC-webbed chairs, cameras cocked and loaded. But a different, feathered species of what I consider charismatic mega-fauna got me excited on this particular cruise with King Fisher Fleet up the Peace River.

I wasn't expecting excitement. Sure, if anyplace has a reputation for nature that matches what we wildlife-watching snobs in Lee County are used to, it's our neighbor Charlotte County. Boasting the second largest estuary in the state—270-square-mile Charlotte Harbor—it also claims 830 miles of gulf, bay, and river shoreline, much of it preserve lands. Eighty-four percent of the harbor itself is protected.

Peace River dumps into the pristine harbor, cleaving between Port Charlotte

and Punta Gorda. King Fisher is based in Punta Gorda at Fishermen's Village. Today a shopping, marina, and lodging complex at the river's mouth, the rough-hewn nautical structure used to be city docks, Rita, one of the day's guides, tells us as we chug from port. Rita and John volunteer at the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center (CHEC), which maintains trails, programs, and a visitor's center at the Charlotte Harbor Preserve State Park south of Punta Gorda on Burnt Store Road and another at Cedar Point in Englewood.

Our guides are versed in both the historical and natural heritage of the region. Rita goes on to explain the importance of the city docks in the region's bygone. Center of a fishing kingdom, it was the transshipment site for catches brought in by the fishermen who lived with their families in stilted fish houses cast throughout the harbor's shallows.



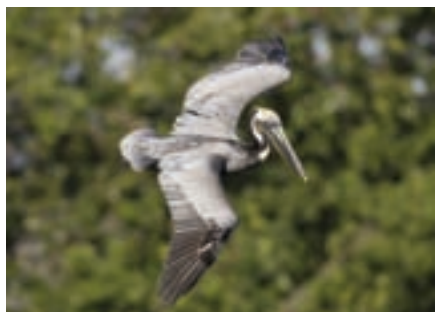
Fishing still ranks high on the region's economic scale, but these days it is recreational fishing that brings in the cash. King Fisher also runs fishing charters, both deep water and back bay. Me, I was more interested in the three-and-a-half-hour cruise that promises nature, though I was skeptical. I judge a nature cruise by what I write down in my notebook as new information and what I capture on my camera as new sights. I've been writing guidebooks on this region for 20 years; I arrogantly believed I had little to learn.

So far, I was right. We spotted the typical array of pelicans, terns, cormorants, and frigates by the time we slid under the double bridges of Interstate 75. The late April day was warming up by our 1 p.m. departure, but the *Good Times Too's* top deck, covered by an awning, benefited from a pleasant breeze. Downstairs, you can sit in enclosed comfort, and soft drinks and snacks are available for purchase. There's also a restroom. The top

deck seats about 50, and our cruise that day was filled to capacity with mostly tourists and snowbirds.

Rita imparted her knowledge about the brown pelicans we saw resting under the bridge and what the different colors on their heads told about their age and breeding status. She talked about their comeback after DDT—which caused fragility in their eggs—was banned. As we watched one dive-bomb for a fish, she explained that the birds come equipped with airbag-like protection in their chest, but the diving does eventually damage their eyes. I liked the airbag fact; I wrote it down.

The cruise upriver eventually left development behind for protected clots of mangroves and stretches of black needlerush marsh. The April sky drew a veil of clouds over its soft blue pallor, and a half moon hung in the sky, barely distinguishable, more like one more knot of cloud. The water was less tannic than I've found upriver, perhaps because of its width here. I learned that like the Caloosahatchee River, the Peace suffers from purity compromise. In this case, though, it is phosphate mining



(Below) King Fisher Fleet's double-decker *Good Times Too* awaits its next passengers, while a brown pelican takes flight (left)



TOP PHOTO BY PAUL TESSIER, BOTTOM PHOTO BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

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Passengers board for a foray into wilderness along the Peace River (above), while a glossy ibis shows off its flip and feed technique (right).

adversely affecting the quality, and Charlotte County has been unsuccessful in blocking the pollution.

Our guides divulge other facts that “the Florida tourism people don’t tell you,” including statistics about shark attacks, gruesome alligator stories, and the unsavory truth about how buzzards can accurately project vomit. Didn’t know that one!

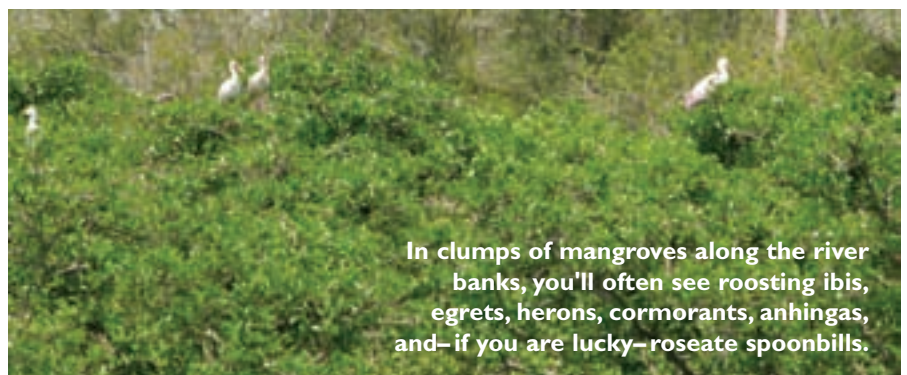
The lessons we learn about the flora were less gory and worth a couple of entries in the notepad. Mangroves, for example, produce “live young”—a new way of putting the fact that a mangrove pod contains not a seed but an actual encapsulated baby tree that plants itself. Cabbage palms host a microcosm of wildlife: from certain species of ferns that grow nowhere else to rats and the rat snakes that hunt them. Leather ferns, cypress trees, and pine appeared in the landscape upriver. Footprints from 2004’s Hurricane Charley still lingered, but the resilience and fecundity of local flora were erasing the memories.

The fauna, too, changed with the brackishness of the water, and we began

spotting alligators, sting rays, and cattle egrets, which, Rita told us, originally blew in from Africa. Manatees, otters, and bobcats also populate these waters and woods. About 10 miles upriver we began seeing mangrove rookeries festooned with birds. Now this was exciting. At first, it was just white ibis, snowy and great white egrets, and the occasional wood stork. The next rookery held roseate spoonbills, which aren’t often seen in these parts, and—for me—the prize of the day: glossy ibises. I snapped away, but my only successful glossy capture—one in flight—was but a blur.

The only sign of civilization in these parts is a bygone civilization, what docents call “the ghost town of Liverpool.” Once a late thriving nineteenth-century phosphate town with a post office, steamship docks, and 15 families, today’s site is marked by a few brick foundations riverside. Remnants of more ancient times are the fossils of giant sloth, mastodons, and other Ice Age creatures that paleontologists and hobbyists find in the river.

The trip back to Fishermen’s Village



In clumps of mangroves along the river banks, you’ll often see roosting ibis, egrets, herons, cormorants, anhingas, and—if you are lucky—roseate spoonbills.

GLOSSY IBIS PHOTO BY STEPHEN MUSKIE; OTHER PHOTOS BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON



is quiet, drowsy even. I've filled several pages of notes and shot dozens of pictures, so I'm content to merely observe. A rope swing hangs from a tree, a few humble homes crop up, and the clock moves forward as we reach signs of new development in downtown Punta Gorda, where vestiges of hurricane damage are being covered by man-made growth.

And so ends the cycle of life on which the Peace River Nature Tour has taken us—from centuries past and an Old Florida that will always remain, then back to the future, where hopefully the words “dolphin,” “alligators,” and “glossy ibis” will still hold magic. 🦘

Chelle Koster Walton is travel editor for Times of the Islands and writes on the subjects of cuisine and travel. She also writes for Miami Herald, Caribbean Travel & Life, St. Petersburg Times, National Geographic Traveler, and other publications.

If You Go

King Fisher Fleet's affordable sightseeing cruises also include full-day excursions to Cabbage Key or Cayo Costa (\$24.95), a half-day (\$19.95) or one-and-a-half-hour (\$12.95) harbor cruise, and a one-hour sunset cruise (\$9.95). Cost for the Peace River Nature Tour is \$19.95. Children younger than 12 pay half-price on all tours. 941-639-0969, www.kingfisherfleet.com.

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